

The Importance of the Beginning

By Zofia Chlopek

For the last five years (that is the period of my teaching career) I have read the articles in *Forum* searching for new ideas, especially those which make learning (and teaching) fun. Many of them I successfully put into practice. However, quite a lot of the ideas proposed in *Forum* could not be applied with the groups I taught. This is because they were mainly designed for advanced students. What I would like to point out is that the elementary-level students, who always and everywhere form a large group of learners, are most often disregarded by creators of teaching ideas. We should not forget the important fact that the beginning is the most important phase in the whole process of learning. For a beginner, everything is new and exciting. S/he has heard many words, phrases, or songs in English, probably without understanding them, and now his/her chance has come! And-what is even more important-his/her mind is clean with respect to this language, so everything he learns first will be taken in without any of the confusion which may come later, when more and more rules and words will have to be assimilated.

Of course, this is not a new idea: many methodologists have pointed to the importance of first learning steps. For instance, H. E. Palmer says, "it is the early lessons which are going to determine the eventual success or failure of the course" (1964:29). According to him, at this early stage of learning, the student has the most plastic or flexible mind and that is when learning habits are most easily formed-only the teacher must take care that they are good habits, so important in the further stages of learning. "It is the elementary stage, long or short, which will prepare the student for this increasing rate of progress, and an elementary course which has not so prepared the student cannot be said to have accomplished its purpose. It is during the elementary stage that we turn out the good or the bad worker. The function of the first lesson is not only to teach the language, but, more important still, to teach the student how to learn." (1964:33)

In my search for useful ideas concerning beginning students, I have come across a book about the *suggestopedic method*, first described by the Bulgarian physician and psychiatrist, Georgi Lozanov, and later developed in various countries into a number of variants (for example: *effective-affective* learning in Great Britain, *superlearning* in the USA and in Canada, *psychopedia* in West Germany, or *hypnopedia* and *relaxopedia* in the countries of the former Soviet Union). Both the original method as well as its variants focus on the first stages of foreign-language learning. The courses concentrate on the beginners, because their creators remember that the habits developed in the early-stages of learning are the most important. After finishing a suggestopedic course, a student can continue language study by himself, because the basic language rules, forms, and structures are already coded in his mind.

The *suggestopedic method* and its variants-apart from the fact that they focus on beginners-also have other crucial advantages: first of all, they concentrate mainly on the subconscious processes of the mind, for which the right half of the brain is responsible. This makes learning much easier because the mind is not bombarded by grammar and dry language facts, but is enriched by a given language without much effort on the part of the student. Music and breath exercises lead to

full relaxation and freedom from stress. So, too, a wide range of word games and language roles, illustrations and drawings, make learning stress-free. In addition, to absolutely get rid of the problems of everyday life, learners acquire a new personality for the length of time of the course and this new "self" becomes responsible for the language errors committed-not the "real self" of the learner-thereby preserving his/her self-esteem.

Unfortunately, introduction of any of the variants of Lozanov's method is nearly impossible in traditional Polish schools. The reasons are manifold: a limited number of classes per week, and too short a class period is devoted to English. These factors are the result of insufficient numbers of foreign-language teachers (because of low salaries). Adequate equipment is lacking (very often the only accessories a teacher has are a blackboard and a piece of chalk). And inadequate training is available to teachers, many of whom stick to their old handbooks and teaching habits.

As for me, I am doing my best to put the ideas of the *suggestopedic method* into practice. I do my best to use my pantomime abilities (I am not a born actress, but I am not ashamed to act a little if it helps my students) to relax the classroom atmosphere and help my students memorize language facts. Pantomime abilities are especially important in the first stages of learning.

There are few opportunities to introduce breath and listening exercises, as they require comfortable armchairs, adequate light, and perhaps a longer period of time given over to English class. I try to use a tape-recorder as often as possible, even if it means listening to songs or singing them most of the time. (Even used in this way, music relaxes the atmosphere and raises the students' spirits). Easy songs are especially useful in teaching beginning students, who still cannot produce more complicated utterances, and repeating texts from a book becomes boring. Let the students enjoy singing-the right half of the brain will do its job and they will remember the rules anyway.

I noticed quite long ago that drawings, especially humorous ones, decidedly improve the memorization processes. Therefore I sometimes do some additional preparation in the evening and produce large illustrations, perhaps not always logical, but funny. As there is no English classroom at the University where I could hang such pictures, I have invented "The English Corner"-a board which I placed on the corridor wall-and there I stick things which I consider learner-useful: illustrated idioms, phrases or simply words, some more difficult texts for advanced students (many of which I borrow from *Forum* ,) texts of songs, and-what the students like best-interesting homework or tasks to be completed during the class. The first subject after the holiday break was "Autumn." I glued dried leaves from different trees and also a few nuts and acorns onto pieces of paper and next to each of them, I wrote the name in English-it looked very pretty indeed. I always put phonetic transcription next to words and, if a more difficult text is presented, I add a small sheet with vocabulary. The aim of "The English Corner" is absolutely subconscious-the students do not treat it as something obligatory, and thus read everything just for pleasure, not worrying about remembering things and not realizing that they are remembering!

Many teachers may feel skeptical about the new "subconscious" method, but I can assure them that it really works.

Sometimes with beginners I used utterances which were grammatically far ahead of their actual knowledge. I said carelessly, "Oh, well, you don't have to remember it just yet," but they did! When we finally came to the given grammatical material, I was surprised to find that it was not absolutely new to most of them. "How do you know that?" I asked. "You mentioned it some time ago," they answered.

It turns out that it is really not necessary to stick to an old, orderly syllabus: Students are really able to remember far more than teachers and researchers suppose-especially in the first learning phase. At this early stage it is important to impart as great an understanding of the system of language as possible.

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References

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